

Fools, Gold and Gossip^{© Xen}

Gossip kills. When I was a young pup of 9 years old, we lived in a rural farming community about 20 miles outside of Gresham Oregon. Local gossip controlled the ‘countryside grapevine’ and biting tongues ruled it. There was an old man, a hermit, war Veteran, who lived with his dog in a tar-paper shack down in the creek bottoms, which drained mountain, winter snow melts in spring. He drove an old beat-up car when not wandering the countryside with his dog picking up returnable beer and soda bottles to cash in at three cents small and five cents large. He would redeem them at *The Country Store* then buy a cheap bottle of wine before heading back to his shack. When there was no other paying work, I scoured the countryside searching for bottles, too. I would see him and his dog from afar doing the same. I left many bottles for him moving them into plain sight, easy to find; he needed them more than I; he only had that dog and ‘The War.’ I had parents. The old man wore an old tattered, Army uniform, cap, boots, and in winter an Army jacket. I overheard my parents say that he had been in ‘The War’ and it messed him up very badly. Parents also said ‘repeating grapevine gossip’ that he had ‘gold’ hidden away brought back from that war. In addition to seeing him wandering the countryside, he also frequented local berry fields during picking season. Bout the only predictable paying work I could get was in those fields. I worked them earning money to buy dress clothes for coming school year picking strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, blackcaps and more during summer harvest. An occasional paying odd job rounded out home chores, which kept me very busy. My day began before dawn with chores, and then I would walk to the fields, work all day, come home, do more chores, eat, go to bed, and repeat. We were poor and each person had to pull his or her weight; that was childhood; that was life. I heard all work and no play make for a dull boy; that is all I knew, I did all right. Berry picking is a very labor-intensive task, which requires many people to do. The highly perishable nature of fruit required reaping it at the right time and quickly, especially for fresh fruit markets and canneries. Field owners contracted out to folk who ran buses into Portland’s ghetto and skid row districts, where day laborers gathered for work. They would pick up and transport winos, bums, street people, derelicts, and more all looking to earn enough money to feed their hungry ghosts. This was before society called such people bag ladies, homeless, addicts, tent people, etc. They would ride the buses to the fields; pick all day to earn a few dollars then return late in the day to Portland. After that, they vanished a few days buying shelter from the demons haunting their souls until money ran out. Then return to the harvests or other temporary labor and do it again. Adding to these ranks were migrant workers, a few local kids like me, and people such as the old man who needed work to get by. Berry fields were in constant rotation of first picking, second picking and rarely third pick. We reported to a field boss who assigned each person a row. Then I grabbed an empty crate and filled it with picked fruit. Once full, toted it to weigh station for pay, grabbed another empty crate, returned to my row, and continued picking. Once picked clean, I requested a new row from field boss and ditto all day long. Before going home, one always asked bus drivers where to go for the next day’s crop. After second or rarely a third picking, owners for a daily admission price would open a spent field to the public to self-pick leftovers. First picking was best. The experience was very interesting but hard work: dirty, hot, physical, long hours of body breaking labor. I would see the Vet and his dog, which accompanied him everywhere, in the fields working like a fiend earning his meager keep. At three to five cents a pound, it beat hunting returnable bottles for cash. The old man blended very well with the rest from Portland’s disadvantaged district. So did I. Those people had some wild and woolly stories to thrill a kid, and delight me they did! I talked to the Vet once. He was harmless. We were picking strawberries and he was on a row next to me. The old man was preoccupied with a hunted, haunted, distant look in his eyes – nervously glancing about as if devils were all around him. He loved his dog, a bottle of wine and spoke of nothing else. I was hoping for a war story like on Cinema. He never said a word about ‘The War.’ I was just a naïve kid who did not understand such real life horrors – like war, yet. The work was tiresome as hell, yet he labored all day without complaint – remaining silent, mostly. Sometimes though, he muttered and mumbled talking to unseen things. Gossips said “The War” really messed him up. I wondered, if he had ‘gold’ like ‘they said,’ why did he come out here to do this for only a few bucks a day? With ‘gold,’ he could buy all the wine in the world as only a kid my age could imagine it. Big people puzzled me greatly – especially gossips. Their willful blindness to not see that he was just a harmless troubled old man barely surviving. Then one day I overheard my parents in hushed tones say, ‘they found the Vet and his dog murdered.’ The killer tied the old man to a chair and tortured him by cutting off his fingers. He bled to death. Sheriff deputies found his old car and tar-paper shack ransacked; even the mattress on which he slept they found cut open: searching for gold? Never found who did it, nobody cared: he was just an old man. I do not think there was any treasure to find. ***Just fools, gold and evil gossip.*** He was only a lonely, tormented, old loner fighting his monsters. Yet, demonic tongues of a Devil’s grapevine would not leave him alone until they killed him. The only blessing in that - he stopped suffering to join his ancestors free from demons of ‘The War.’ Gossip kills.